

Ryokan: a Place Where You Can Experience a Traditional Japanese Life Style

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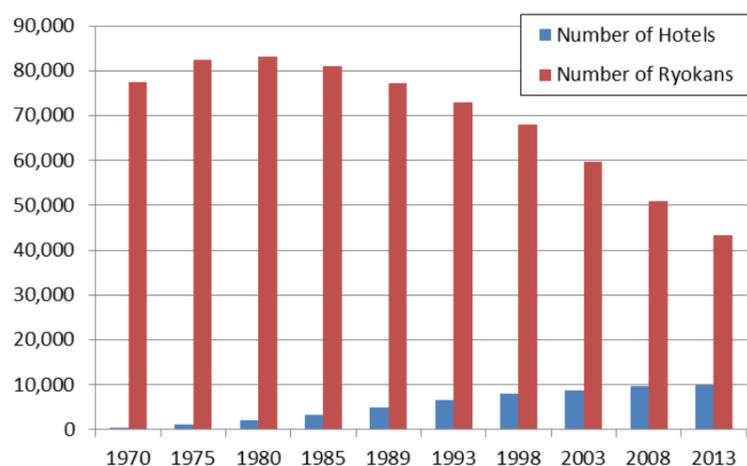
If you are going to travel within Japan, which accommodation will you choose, a ryokan: a Japanese inn or a hotel? It is sometimes difficult to discern by name alone if it is a ryokan or a hotel, but even if the accommodations are similar, the roots are very different. A ryokan has a long history as a style of Japanese accommodations. A hotel of Tsukiji during the late Tokugawa period is considered to be the pioneer in Japan, and hotels have gradually increased in popularity as the accommodations for foreign visitors to Japan after the Meiji era. The number of hotels grew steadily during the post-war economic boom, triggered by the Tokyo Olympic Games in 1964, and now the number of hotel guest rooms has exceeded that of ryokan rooms. Generally speaking a characteristic of the ryokan is the *tatami* room where a *futon* is laid out for sleeping. If you can enter a guest room with your shoes on and there is a bed in the room, it's a hotel.



Guest Room of a Ryokan (Yoshii-ryokan, Kurashiki City)

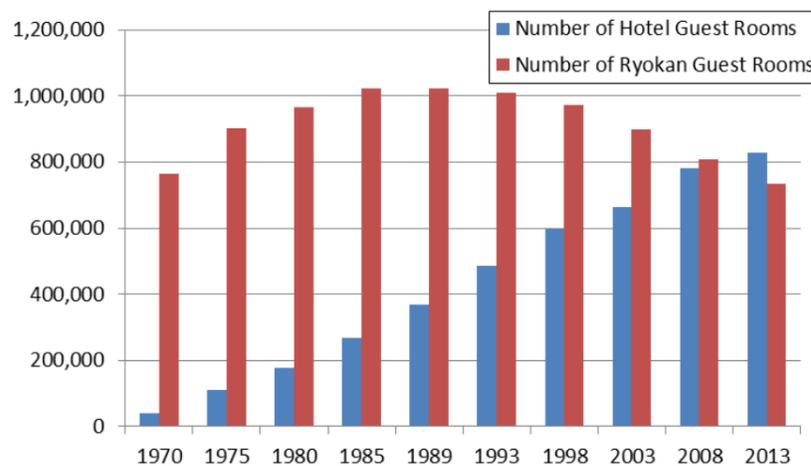
The number of ryokans begins to decrease from 1980, and by 2013 it had decreased by 52%. Similarly, the number of ryokan guest rooms began to decrease in the 1990s and had become less than the number of the hotel guest rooms by 2013. Hotels exceed ryokans in the number of guest rooms because the scale of hotels is generally larger than ryokans. According to a bankruptcy trend survey of hotels and ryokans of Teikoku Data Bank, the most business failures occurred in 2011 when we had The Great East Japan Earthquake followed by 2008: depression due to the Lehman shock.

Ryokans have continued decreasing since the 1980s, and in recent years have been affected by a great earthquake disaster and the recession, but is it an unattractive option? I do not think those ryokan were simply discarded as the ryokan is the best place to relax and refresh oneself. Soaking in the large bath, enjoying coziness of a Japanese-style tatami room and having a fine dinner is a fabulous experience. You can also enjoy the pleasant feeling of your bare feet on the tatami after the bath, which feels so good. While many aspects of the Western lifestyle have spread in Japan, a very important part of the traditional lifestyle has been kept in the ryokan and will again become popular among the Japanese. With the number of tourists from foreign countries increasing rapidly, it is expected that the ryokan will attract increasing attention as a place where traditional Japanese culture can be found and where tourists can immerse themselves in a Japanese lifestyle.



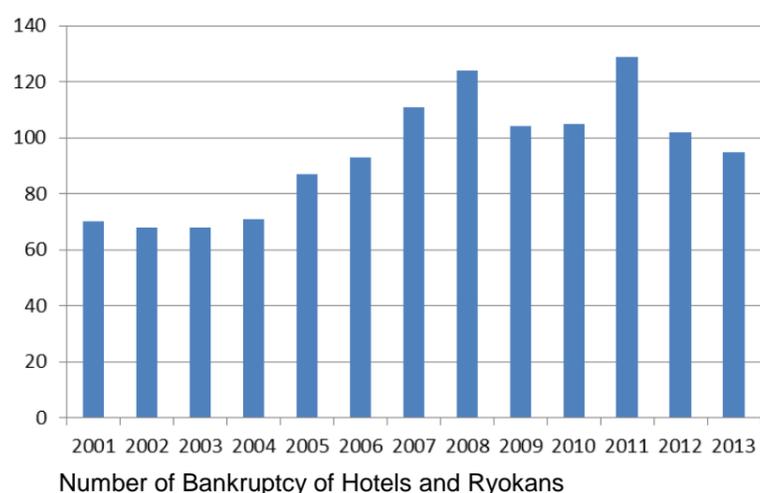
Number of Ryokans and Hotels

Source: Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare. *Report on Public Health Administration and Services.*



Number of Ryokan Guest Rooms and Hotel Guest Rooms

Source: Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare. *Report on Public Health Administration and Services.*



Source: Teikoku Databank. *Survey on Bankruptcy Trend among Hotels and Ryokans*. 2014.

Starting from removing your shoes at the entrance, going into the tatami room, and sleeping on a futon, these are experiences unique to Japan. If you are interested in *Zen*, you can try meditation on the tatami. Green tea and sweets served in the guest room would also be nice and refreshing. If you are interested in Japanese kimono and you want to wear a yukata, a ryokan is the place to visit. Recently, you can choose your favorite yukata in some ryokans. Moreover probably, bathing in large bath or *onsen*, hot spring, with many people will be the most exciting experience. Most of the onsens have a good effect on your skin, and it is good for getting rid of your fatigue. Some ryokan have a scenic *rotenburo*, outdoor bath. You may need courage to bath with others, because those baths and hot springs are enjoyed naked; swimming suits are not allowed in most places. Some more rules before entering the bath. First, rinse your body with water or wash your body with soap at a water tap. Make sure that no soap gets into the bath water. Enter the bath and soak for a while and enjoy being sunken up to your chin in hot water. If you feel the water too hot, try to enter very slowly and move as little as possible. After you finished soaking, wipe yourself off before coming out to the dressing area. If you soaked in hot spring, do not rinse your body with tap water or rinse very lightly, for the hot spring water's minerals to have full effect on your body. Ryokan guests typically take a bath before dinner, and wear a yukata. Some people bathe after dinner or before breakfast, and it is not uncommon to bathe more than once during one's stay.

Dinner is the highlight of a ryokan stay together with taking a bath. In many cases the dinner is *kaiseki ryori*, Japanese haute cuisine that features local and seasonal specialties with many beautiful dishes. *Kaiseki ryori* is served with the order of dishes taking into account the best timing of hot dishes and traditionally served in the guest rooms. To begin dinner smoothly you will be asked your dinner time when you check-in. Please keep in mind two meals: dinner and breakfast are typically prepared for a one night stay of ryokan. So don't be too concerned about the ryokan rates which are calculated per person, per night, and are inclusive of dinner and breakfast, with no need for tipping. While large ryokan may offer buffet-style breakfasts that include both Japanese and Western dishes. Budget ryokan offers only breakfast or no meals; this is one they resemble hotels.



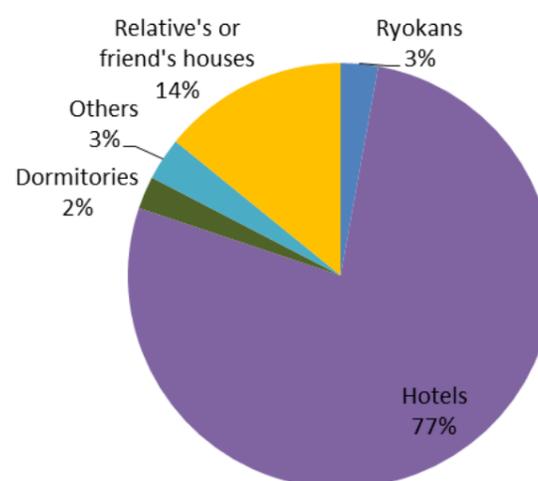
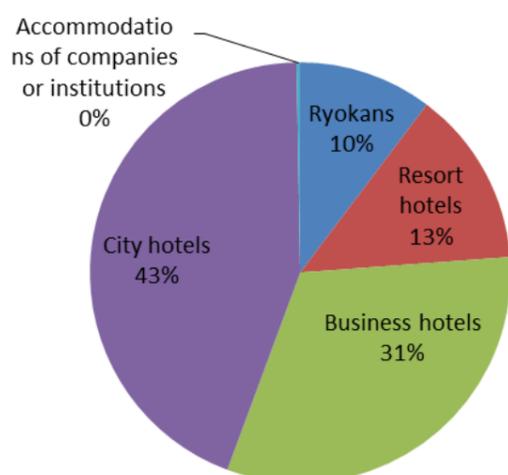
Dinner at a Ryokan Guest Room



Onsen(s-hoshino.com)

The latest accommodation survey shows ryokan have not yet become well-known by inbound tourists. The ratio of use of ryokan among the accommodations

of inbound tourists was only 10% in 2014. City hotels were the most common at 43%, followed by business hotels: 31%, and resort hotels: 13%. As foreign tourists may stay at relatives' houses or friends' houses rather than paid accommodations, the real stay at ryokans is not as low as indicated. The Mori Memorial Foundation asked inbound tourists about their lodging during their stay in Japan 2009. Those staying at a ryokan were amazingly low at 3%. It is such a shame that the tourists are missing out the ryokan experience.



Share of Foreign Nationals in the Total Number of Accommodation Guests by Accommodation (2014)

Source: Japan Tourism Agency. *Accommodation Survey*. 2014.

Share of Inbound Tourists by Lodging Place (2009)

Source: The Mori Memorial Foundation. *Tokyo Brand Power*. 2010.

Until recently reservations for ryokans has been not so easy by non-Japanese. However some reservation websites now give us precise English catalogues and offer competitive rates: such as [Japanese Guesthouses](#), [Japanican](#), and [Rakuten Travel](#). Reservations can also be made on ryokans' websites, if they have one. Or reservations can be made using a traditional travel agency. Same day reservations are not common, and many ryokans may not be able or willing to accommodate them because dinner preparation must be made in advance of your arrival.

Ryokans are not as well-known as hotels for many inbound tourists so far. Because of the traditional styles, ryokan may appear somewhat rigid and intimidating for the first timer. However the reality is there is special and relaxing experience that everyone should take a chance to try. [Some information](#) about ryokans will help you to set your mind at ease. And some more courage to choose ryokan stays will bring you a deeper Japan experience.



A historic ryokan in an old townscape of Kurashiki City (Yoshii-ryokan)